

THESE, TOO, WERE UNSHACKLED

15 DRAMATIC STORIES FROM THE PACIFIC GARDEN MISSION

Adapted from the "Unshackled!" Radio Scripts by

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Chapter 10

Anywhere Is Nowhere - HARRY VENNEMA

TO young Harry Vennema, a cozy fireplace, clean ruffled curtains, and bread baking in the kitchen spelled just one thing. Prison! Harry's family were all home-loving, gentle people whose life centered around their home on its pleasant street in a little Holland village. But Harry was born different.

On rainy nights, with his sisters and father and mother clustered around the glowing coal stove, Harry was a caged thing - pacing, trapped. On bright sunny days, whatever was at the end of the road - any road - called to him so loudly that he could hardly bring his feet to take him to school.

His parents fretted over Harry. "Harry, son, why do you keep looking? Looking for something that's not time to come yet?"

Harry's hands went on whittling a boat from a block of wood.

"Why not, Mama? I'll never find anything if I don't look for it." He touched the hull of the boat lovingly.

Wiping her hands on her apron, his mother implored, "But what is it you want, Harry? You got a good home. Good parents who love you and two good sisters who take care of you. What is it you want, Harry?"

He had no answer. What he wanted was somewhere, at the end of some road. But he didn't know what it was. He hadn't even found the road.

"I want to quit school," he mumbled.

"Quit school! A fourteen-year-old boy. Why, you have hardly begun the learning, my son."

"Don't you think I know that?" "Well, then . . ."

"So let me learn a trade. Something like shoemaking. I'd be happy, Mama, I know I would - if I didn't have to go to school every day, if I could have my own trade and earn some money."

Money would buy his ticket to the world beyond the wall of great elms that marked the end of the confining village. Money meant travel and an easing of the wanderlust fever. At seventeen, he went to work as a shoemaker and he began to save. The more money, the more trips. Harry didn't care where he went. It could be anywhere, as long as he would see something different from the world he had always seen.

At eighteen, he took his first trip, not only leaving his village but adventuring off into a new country. In Germany, Harry discovered that things were quite different from staid village life at home. There was lots of beer flowing, and there were plenty of pretty girls. He explored the cafes, sampled the beer, and got well acquainted with the frauleins who were more plump and pleasing than the Dutch girls back home.

But once, drinking away an evening in a cafe, Harry suddenly realized that he had heard the same polka every night. He knew that the blonde fraulein was going to turn and say "Ach, Harry!" He was keenly aware that he had been here and had seen all there was to see. The old fever was burning. There was more in the world than this, and he wouldn't be happy until he saw it.

Eventually his money ran out, and he went back to Holland and his trade. Trapped by the four walls of a cobbler's shop and gossiping old women, he dreamed about his next trip. France, maybe. Paris!

But one Christmas night, something happened that changed his dreams. The Vennema family had a guest - the father of Harry's old school friend, Henry Havenga, who had a strange tale to tell about his son.

"Lo, Henry's doing good in America. You wouldn't believe what he's got," the father clucked.

"What's Henry got in America?" Harry demanded.

"Good big job in furniture factory for one thing. So big he is buying his own home and owns his own furniture - and all inside of four years too!"

Seated in a cozy ring around the homely stove, the Vennema family sighed in appreciation. All but Harry, who stood at the window, looking out at the snow. America! It seemed as far away as Paradise; it was a paradise of space, people, cities, and adventure. It was the other side of here. It was what was behind the closed door.

"Where in America?" Harry asked.

"That's the good about it. My boy is in Holland." "Holland!"

"Holland, Michigan!" The Vennema family exploded into happy chuckles. Reducing America to the familiar, they could accept it, Harry thought in disgust. He went to stand alone in the kitchen, his heart racing.

Before the winter was over, Harry sailed for America.

At the ship, he could see that his leaving was breaking his parents' hearts. But the wanderlust was stronger than love, so he stiffened against the sight of the tears dropping on his father's bushy beard.

"Harry, son, we want to send you off with a smile. Don't we, Mama?"

"Ja, we do, Harry. It's hard, though, for a mother and a father," his mother said softly.

"Lots of people go to America." Why should he stay imprisoned within a wall of elm trees? Why couldn't they understand how he felt?

Dimly, he heard his father say, "Don't forget GOD is in America."

Maybe He was! Maybe that's exactly where GOD was. "Remember GOD is in America, Harry," his father droned again.

"Listen, Papa. I'm going to America to make a lot of money. If GOD is where the money is, then we'll be together."

But the ship's whistle cut short his words, and his heart leaped. The whistle was calling him. "Everything is new and exciting beyond," it was saying. "Just turn your back on the old and if you travel far enough, you'll find the new. It's just on the other side, around the bend, over the horizon, beyond the clouds."

He brushed his cheek against his mother's soft wet one and turned away.

In America, Harry Vennema stayed for a while in New York City and then went to Holland, Michigan, where he found a job in a furniture factory. His eyes were so busy with all that was new that he was content. The desire to be off - to go over the next hill - had disappeared. Or so he thought.

So when he found himself falling in love with a girl named Effie, he decided that he would settle down. Perhaps with a pretty girl inside, four walls would not seem so close.

For a while, that was the way it was. But one night, after a supper of home-baked beans and fresh brown bread, Harry felt something gnawing at him. Suddenly the kitchen was too small for him. The house was too small. Holland, Michigan, was too small.

"Want to take a walk, Harry?" Effie hovered over him. "You look tired. Maybe the cool breeze outside will rest you."

"No, Effie, no. I don't want to walk. What's there to see if we do. We've seen it all. Have we been to all the movies in town?"

She nodded. "They change tomorrow."

He knew she believed that. This placid girl, who loved the routine of her home so well, couldn't

understand. "When they change they're still just like the old ones. Effie, don't you get tired of everything?"

Effie frowned.

"This little old house - the same streets - the same people - does everything just get one way and stay there?" He was on his feet now, pacing off the square rug. A turn to the window, to stare out at the street. A turn to the fireplace, where he stood smacking his fist into his palm. "Honey, I've got an idea. Let's move to Chicago."

"Chicago! Oh Harry!"

"Yeah, Chicago. Right away. I can make a lot more money there. And I want a lot more money. If we move to Chicago, I know I'll have everything I don't have here." And what was that? At the window, Harry couldn't have told Effie if she had asked. Looking out at the street, he knew that if he followed it long enough he would come to Chicago. In Chicago, he would find whatever he was looking for. There he would be complete.

He moved to Chicago and he found a new job easily. But completeness was not in this new city either. Its vastness shattered what little peace and unity Harry had. So much to see! So many people! So many streets - north, south, east, west. Nothing could confine him now - not the four walls of his home, not the hovering Effie. Evenings and weekends, he was off.

Of all the fascinating parts of this fascinating city, it was Skid Row that drew him like a magnet. There nobody questioned a restless foot, a curious eye. Harry sensed a kinship with the street's homeless. Every free minute, he was lured south of the Loop.

He remained well-dressed and respectable. He always had plenty of money in his pocket. He drank sparingly. Drawn by the abandon he found there, Harry was determined that he would take all the excitement and leave all the shame. He would stay successful, make a lot of money. But here at the cheap bars and the burlesque shows, he would appease the hunger that gnawed him. He would ease the fever, for here on Clark Street and State Street he could wander anonymously.

But in his home he was not anonymous. Effie expected him to be a husband - and a father, after their son was born. She knew where he spent his evenings, and he knew she would always be waiting for him when he came home. Her constancy only quickened his steps, made him turn up one street and down the next in an urgency to see what was around the corner before he was caught again in routine.

For a while, after Dick was born, the fever eased. But back he went to his old ways. It wasn't long before he knew that his son had inherited his own restlessness. But Dick had been born, too, with a beautiful singing voice. Even as a youngster he sang in clubs, sometimes in churches. Harry was proud of his son's voice but he protested singing in churches.

Harry protested everything about a church. A church was a trap, he said, and GOD was a delusion. Joining a church would imprison you for life with dull people. Their surveillance would take away your freedom. Church was one thing about which Harry Vennema had no curiosity.

Yet he bought a Bible once from an old Swedish man. He said it was because the poor old fellow reminded Effie of her father. But the grocer at the corner scoffed. "Harry Vennema own a Bible!" From that day, his restlessness turned into doing everything he could to make fun of - GOD!

Now nothing made him happier than heckling men from the missions, holding their Sunday afternoon meetings on Skid Row streets.

"Radicals, that's what you are! Just a bunch of lousy radicals that ought to be shut up in four walls. You ought to be shut up in a church with the rest of the radicals - instead of being out here on the street disturbing the peace."

A big, good-looking man with a wooden leg limped out of the mission crowd and approached Harry. "Listen, my friend, you can't shut the Son of GOD up in four walls. I found Him in a cornfield and if you need Him as much as I think you do, you'd better get on your knees right here on Madison Street and let Him in where He belongs."

Pulling a roll of bills from his pocket, Harry swung it in the big fellow's face. "You keep your cornfield GOD! See this? This is my god."

"And where would you turn if you woke up some day and find that your god is gone? Where would you be then?"

Harry stood there for a minute, hating the big man. Then he turned and hurried away from the sidewalk hymn sing. His afternoon was spoiled. There was nothing to do but go home.

Harry did not forget the big fellow and what he had said.

Night and day he was tormented by the fact that his god might leave him. Then where would he turn?

Sunday after Sunday he continued to roam south of the Loop, taking in one burlesque show after another. Now he had a new burning to ease. His old wanderlust was with him yet. But now he was uneasy - downright afraid.

Although he still hated churches, he decided to slip into a Skid Row mission just to reassure himself that religion was a snare for the weak and ignorant. For three Sundays, Harry Vennema attended services at the Pacific Garden Mission. When the speaker gave the invitation for people to receive CHRIST as Saviour, he walked out.

But on the fourth Sunday, he was back. He sat through the sermon, hand in his pocket, tightly clenched around his roll of bills. The man at the organ began to play a hymn, and Harry started out the front door. There he collided with a young man.

"Sorry," he said quickly. "I was in too much of a hurry." The young man blocked his way. "Do you mind if I ask you - what for?"

Harry was seized with an intense need to get past this boy who reminded him of his own son. But the young man stood firm. "Do you know where you're going in such a hurry?" he persisted.

"Out. Away from here." Harry stepped to one side. So did the young man.

"Away from GOD? That it? Look, get sore at me if you want to. But there comes a time when every one of us needs to ask himself that question - 'where am I going?'"

It was clear that the fellow thought he was a bum. Harry brought out his roll of bills. "I'm no bum .. I got money. I can do what I want to do. Go where I want to, go . . ."

"And that is - where?"

"Anywhere," Harry said shortly.

But the young fellow went on. "Anywhere is nowhere. You need a destination for Eternity. We all do . . . We go chasing after this and that - excitement, money. But we don't know what we're really looking for. Some people never find it."

But we don't know what we're really looking for. Some people never find it. Germany, the New World, Michigan, Chicago - all the roads that had promised to satisfy but had never kept their promise!

"All the time the thing we're looking for is looking for us. It isn't a thing at all. It's a Person. JESUS CHRIST. He says so Himself. **'The Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.'** That's you and me."

"You think the thing I've been looking for all my life . . ." Harry started to ask, without antagonism.

"Is JESUS CHRIST. Yes. GOD put a longing in your heart. But only Jesus can satisfy it."

A longing had pulled him away from his Holland home, drawing him to a new country, impelling him to seek Skid Row. But nothing had satisfied. Not a good wife, a talented son, not the tinsel burlesque shows. The longing remained.

The young man repeated, "Only JESUS can satisfy it." Harry wanted to believe this. He was willing to forget his fears about the church gobbling up freedom. "How do I know that's true?" he pleaded.

"He'll show you. If you'll let Him." "Well, how?" Harry said.

"Come on. The first thing to do is to ask Him."

Thus Harry Vennema's lifelong restlessness ended. He found what he had always been looking for. At last, Harry was complete.

It happened almost thirty years ago, but since that day the fever has never burned within Harry. The wanderlust has gone. Four walls are no longer a prison, for within them, within Harry himself, abides JESUS CHRIST.

~ end of chapter 10 ~
